

REFERENCE COHESION WITHIN THE COMPLEX SENTENCE IN THE KISWAHILI OF NAIROBI

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This paper focuses on reference cohesion within a complex sentence in the day-to-day Kiswahili of Nairobi. The thrust of its argumentation is that although earlier research inspired by Halliday and Hasan (1976) has been of the view that higher discourse organization beyond the sentence is the locus of cohesion, a Kiswahili complex sentence exhibits a complex within-sentence cohesion structure that cannot be ignored. Clauses in the Kiswahili complex sentence are tied and reinforced by reference expressions like personal pronouns and relative pronouns. Through such cohesive devices, reference cohesion is created or reinforced within the sentence, as the information structure is revealed more clearly while at the same time being expressed in an economical way.

1. INTRODUCTION

Earlier research following Halliday and Hasan (1976) has argued that sentence-level cohesion in Kiswahili is less significant than between-sentence cohesion (Habwe 1999; Mulila 2005; Njue 1989). Habwe (1999) focused on cohesion to understand the ties that existed in seemingly disjointed extemporaneous oral political speeches in Kiswahili. He argued that lexical cohesion seemed prevalent compared to the other cohesion types. For his part, Njue (1989) sought to examine how Kiswahili cohesion was crucial to a Kiswahili narrator. He argued that cohesion helped in the chaining together of a narrative in Kimvita (one of the Kiswahili dialects spoken in Kenya on the Mombasa island). As for Mulila (2005), she sought to determine the role of cohesion in establishing text linking in Kiswahili. She maintained that cohesion was a vital surface link that pointed to underlying relationships in Kiswahili literary texts. The three researchers had very little to say about cohesion within the sentence. They were concerned with

cohesion at the macro-level to the total exclusion of the micro-level, yet one which is the basic brick in building cohesion patterns at a higher level of discourse.

So, the present paper seeks to challenge the earlier view on sentence cohesion by using data from casual talk and arguing that sentence level cohesion is quite significant, especially when the sentence involved is a complex one where a number of clauses have to be linked together. Halliday and Hasan (1976: 7-8) say the following about sentence cohesion:

Since cohesive relations are not concerned with structure, they may be found just as well within a sentence as between sentences. They attract less notice within a sentence, because of the cohesive strength of grammatical structure; since the sentence hangs together already, the cohesion is not needed in order to make it hang together.

They add that:

...cohesive ties between the sentences stand out more clearly because they are the ONLY source of texture, whereas within the sentence there are structural relations as well.

The observation above may be true with regard to a language like English which has few inflections. However, in agglutinating languages like Kiswahili, morphosyntactic relationships are such that cohesion within a sentence is of paramount importance, as will be seen in the examples below. Morphological units in a Kiswahili sentence express syntactic information like aspect, tense, person, mood, concord, etc. The various units in a sentence have to be linked through sentence cohesion. That is why most sentences taken from casual-talk utterances would be grammatically well formed without co-reference. This then raises these two questions: one, what is their reference structure like? Two, what purpose does this type of cohesion serve?

The need for analysing cohesion within the Kiswahili sentence can be best demonstrated by the following two sets of sentences that have almost the same meaning but differ in the level of cohesion within each of them:

(1) *Ikiwa wakulima watapanda mimea **yao** mapema watazipata pesa za kuipalilia toka kwa serikali **yao**.*

‘If the farmers plant **their** crops early they will get money for weeding **them** from **the** government’.

(2) *Ikiwa wakulima watapanda mimea mapema watapata pesa za kupalilia toka kwa serikali.*

‘If the farmers plant **their** crops early they will get money for weeding **them** from **the** government’.

The meaning is the same despite the fact that sentence (1) is more coherent because of the presence of cohesive devices that refer to objects and subjects in the two clauses which are strung together. The devices in question (i.e. those in bold type) are: the possessive determiner *yao* (‘their’), the personal object pronoun *-zi-* (whose meaning is not explicitly rendered in the English translation) in *watazipata*, the personal object pronoun *-i-* (‘them’) in *kuipalilia*, and the second possessive determiner *yao* (‘their’).

The point which the two sentences above are meant to illustrate rests on a two-fold argument: first, sentence (2), from which the cohesive devices in bold type in sentence (1) are missing, would be perfectly acceptable in the conversational Kiswahili of Nairobi but not that of Mombasa; second, however, even in this conversational style, the use of those reference expressions would make the sentence more coherent.

It follows from this type of argumentation that, contrary to what has been suggested by the research based on Halliday and Hasan, the within-sentence cohesion is no less interesting to study than that between sentences. It is this within-sentence cohesion that is referred to as “reference cohesion” in this paper, because it is achieved through the use of various reference expressions.

I chose to focus on the casual Kiswahili of Nairobi because in its usage object reference tends to be optional, unlike in the Kiswahili of Mombasa, which is perceived by Kenyans as the “best Kiswahili” in the country, and in which reference expressions like those highlighted in sentences (1) and (2) are, typically, obligatory constituents. On the other hand, I chose to focus on casual conversation because in this informal style grammatical subjects and objects are not always obligatory. “Casual talk” is used here to refer to spontaneous talk that occurs among friends, acquaintances, family members, etc. In such encounters there is a high level of context dependency which makes the language highly deictic. Deictic reference refers to an element that is external to a written or spoken text (see Lyons 1995, p. 294). But in Kiswahili casual talk reference can also be highly endophoric. Endophoric reference points to within the text, which makes it the focus of this paper, as it forms the basis for the within-sentence cohesion.

2. ENOPHORIC REFERENCE AS THE BASIS OF SENTENCE COHESION

The complex sentence in Kiswahili conversational encounters displays several types of cohesion: reference, lexical, substitution, conjunction, and ellipsis cohesion. However, this paper will only focus on reference cohesion, which displays a complex reference system. Consider the examples below:

(3) *Hamisi a-na-ye-u-kata mti a-natoka Oman*

Hamisi, who is felling the tree, comes from Oman

(4) *Jumbo a-me-kilalia kitanda ki-lichu na kunguni*

Jumbo is lying on a bed with bedbugs

In sentence (3), the pronoun *a-* of the subordinate clause *anayeukata*, ‘who is felling [it]’, cohesively refers back to *Hamisi*, the subject in the main clause. The prefix *a-* in *anatoka*, ‘[he] comes from’, in the verb of the main clause refers to *Hamisi* as well. The references *a-* and *-ye-* in the embedded clause *anayeukata* and in *anatoka* and the main clause help the entire close to hang together. They also reinforce the reference of *Hamisi* as the subject

of sentence (3). Further, this type of cohesion enables the sentence to express ideas in a more economical way.

For its part, the reference is *u-* in *anayeukata* cataphorically refers to *mti*, 'tree', and helps to reinforce the focus of the subordinate clause. In sentence (4), the first *-ki-* pronominal is cataphoric as well, since it refers forward to *kitanda*, 'bed', while the second *ki-* in *kilicho na*, 'which has', is anaphoric, since it refers back to *kitanda*.

Sometimes the subordinate clause in casual talk may have the pronominal form *ambaye* (with the root *amba-*). But when it does, the bound form *-ye* in *anayeukata* disappears. This is what happens in sentence (5).

(5) *Hamisi ambaye a-na-u-kata mti anatoka Oman.*

Hamisi, who is felling the tree, comes from Oman.

Notice that the verb of the subordinate clause *ambaye anaukata mti* 'who is felling the tree', in sentence (5) will still retain the bound reference, namely *a-* in *anaukata* referring to *Hamisi*.

In a case where the subordinate clause is a clause complement the cohesion patterns would be a bit different. Consider the following example:
(6) *Maria a-mesema kuwa a-ta-ki-soma kitabu hicho.*

Maria said that she would read that book.

The reference *a-* of the main clause *amesoma*, 'she said', refers back to *Maria* and so does the prefix *a-* in *atakisoma*, 'she will read', in the subordinate clause. This double reference helps to further bind the two clauses cohesively, but still in an economical way. For its part, the reference *ki-* of the subordinate clause cataphorically refers to *kitabu* (book). As in the earlier example, the references help to reinforce the subjects and objects of the sentences hence clearly showing areas of focus and possibly emphasis in the sentence.

It is worth pointing out that it is possible for the sentence above to contain an additional personal pronoun, as a free morpheme, before *atakisoma*, 'he will read it', that would still refer to the same referent as

the personal pronoun which has to be attached to the verb. That is the case of **yeye** (her), in the following example.

(7) *Maria a-mesema kuwa yeye a-ta-ki-soma kitabu*

Maria has said that she would read the book

In this example, the three morphemes **yeye**, **a-** (in *amesema*) and **a-** (in *atakisoma*) all anaphorically refer to the noun *Maria*, while the morpheme **-ki-** cataphorically refers to *kitabu*, 'book'. All these personal references help to provide a cohesive link to the text while providing a shorthand way of repeating information for the benefit of casual interaction.

It needs to be mentioned here that sometimes the personal reference **-ki-** could be omitted in casual conversation, as in the following example:

(8) *Maria a-mesema kuwa a-tasoma kitabu.*

Maria said she would read a book.

This has often been said to be one of the major differences between the Kiswahili of Nairobi and that of Mombasa. In the latter, the **-ki-** must appear. Although sentence (7) and sentence (8) have the same meaning, the absence of **-ki-** in the latter sentence makes it less cohesive and less informative, since it lacks the binding and reinforcing relationship that is normally provided by the personal reference **-ki-**. After all, sentence (8) could mean that Maria is reading any book. In this regard, the sentence is ambiguous. The **-ki-** reference helps to reinforce the semantic expression that only a particular book is meant.

When the complex sentence has a subordinate clause that is a nominal and which serves as a subject, the cohesion structure is also different. Consider this example:

(9) *Kwamba Kido a-lifika jana ni jambo lili-lo-tushangaza wengi.*

That Kido came back yesterday is something that shocked many people.

The reference **a-** in *alifika* refers back to Kido. On the other hand the reference **lo-** refers back to *jambo*, while **-tu-** is a non-cohesive reference particle performing a deictic function, as it were.

Apposition seems also to help reinforce reference cohesion. Consider the following example:

(10) *Juma, jirani a-liyekuwa a-natufaa sana, a-meaga dunia.*

Juma, our neighbour who used to help us so much, has died.

In this case, the three *a*-references in the verbs *aliyekuwa*, *anatufaa* and *ameaga* all refer to both *Juma* and *jirani*, 'neighbour'. More than just being grammatical units, the bound references help to bind the related units together as a cohesive text.

A further aspect of reference cohesion that is interesting to look at is the case where the complex verb contains many helping verbs, as in the following example:

(11) *Susan a-li-ye-cheka jana huenda a-kawa a-naweza a-kashikwa na wazimu.*

Susan, who laughed yesterday, perhaps may be possibly growing mad.

This complex sentence is arguably more cohesive than the other sentence types we have looked at so far. This enhanced cohesion is largely caused by the presence of the sequence of auxiliary verbs *akawa anaweza*, which are helping the verb of the main clause, namely *akashikwa*. All three verbs are indeed strung together by the personal pronoun reference *a-* at the beginning of each.

3. PROBLEMATIC REFERENCE COHESION

Reference cohesion can become quite problematic when a conjoined noun phrase is composed of nouns that do not belong to the same noun class, as in the example below.

(12) *Mbuzi, redio na kitanda ki-li-cho-ungua ndani ya nyumba yao kimewahuzunisha.*

The goat, the radio and the bed which got burnt in their house have saddened them.

The conjoined noun phrase *mbuzi, redio na kitanda* serves as the subject of the verbs *kilichoungua*, 'which got burnt', and *kimewahuzunisha*, 'have

saddened them'.¹ The cohesion is problematic in this case because the pronominal references *ki-* (in *kilichoungua* and *kimewahuzunisha*) and *-cho-* (in *kilichoungua*) are singular. Grammatically, they refer only to the last noun (i.e. *kitanda*) in the conjoined noun phrase. This phrase is in the plural because of the conjunction *na*, 'and'.

It should be noted that there is an alternative to sentence (12), in the form of (13):

(13) *Mbuzi, rediyo na kitanda vi-li-vyo-ungua wakati uliopita vi-likuwa na thamani.*

The goat, the radio and the bed which got burned sometime were valuable.

In sentence (13), the reference *vi-* semantically (not grammatically) refers to the entire noun phrase *mbuzi, redio na kitanda* because it refers to all the things (in the sense of 'objects') mentioned previously.² But some people would choose to use the structure in (12), instead of that in (13), because the noun *mbuzi* does not refer to a thing.

A related problem is likely to arise when only words that cannot be referred to as things (in the sense of 'objects') form the conjoined noun phrase, as in the following sentence.

(14) (a) *Maneno na sentensi yameelezwa tulipokuwa mkutanoni.*
(b) *Maneno na sentensi zimeelezwa tulipokuwa mkutanoni.*

Words and sentences were been analyzed when we were at the meeting.

The nouns *maneno*, 'words', and *sentensi*, 'sentences', form the compound noun phrase subject. As can be seen in the example above, there are two possibilities in terms of which pronominal reference to use: either *ya-*, which concords with *maneno*, or *zi-* which concords with *sentensi*. It would be up to the individual speaker to choose which option to use. His otr

¹ Outside this specific context, *kimewahuzinisha* is singular, and thus would correspond to "has saddened them".

² The Kiswahili word for the plural noun 'things' is *vitu*. Grammatically, this noun would have *vi-* as the personal pronoun attached to the verb with it would be associated as a subject or an object.

choice would depend on which of the conjuncts (i.e. whether *maneno* or *sentensi*), he or she would want to lay emphasis on.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to discuss reference cohesion within the complex sentence in casual talk in the Kiswahili of Nairobi. It has shown that this type of reference hinges on the endophoric reference through achieved the use of pronominal expressions. In Kiswahili these are essentially (but exclusively) bound morphemes attached to the verb, either as subjects, as in the case of the initial *a-* in *amekisoma* ('he/she has read it'), or as objects, as in the case of *-ki-* in this same example. These reference expressions typically anaphorically refer back to their antecedents, although occasionally they can cataphorically refer forward to their referents.

Some of those reference expressions were shown to be optional in the Kiswahili (as opposed to that of Mombasa, for instance). That is the case of the object pronoun like the *-ki-* in the preceding paragraph (but not of the subject pronoun *a-*). However, this paper has argued that the presence of even such optional elements reinforces the within-sentence-cohesion.

The paper ended by pointing out that reference cohesion can be problematic, in terms of grammatical (and even semantic) concord. This happens typically in the case where the pronominal expressions attached to the verb have to refer to a conjoined noun phrase the conjuncts of which belong to different nominal classes in Kiswahili.

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